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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 002779

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KCRM SY LE

SUBJECT: MUTED SYRIAN RESPONSE TO FOURTH UNIIIC INSTALLMENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Kathy Johnson-Casares for reasons 1.4  
b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: The SARG has so far limited its public reaction to the fourth report of the UNIIIC investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri, which was delivered to UNSYG Kofi Annan on June 10. SARG officials are relatively happy with the report but are generally refraining from public comment to avoid being cornered by future Brammertz allegations of regime involvement, according to contacts. Brammertz's request for a year-long extension of the investigation benefits the SARG, as well as the U.S., according to Al-Hayat's Damascus-based correspondent. A regime critic described the report as "nothing," and pleasing to the SARG because it "postpones everything" and sends a signal that the regime has little to fear. Although some observers have also suggested that the SARG is worried about incriminating evidence being withheld by Brammertz, so far, this interpretation seems to be a minority view. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The SARG has so far limited its public comment on the latest installment of the UNIIIC investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri. On June 10, UNIIIC Commissioner Serge Brammertz presented the 30-page interim report to UNSYG Kofi Annan. The document described Syrian cooperation with UNIIIC, including Brammertz's April 25 meetings with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and VP Farouk al-Shara'a and UNIIIC interviews with six witnesses in Syria, "arranged as and when requested." It characterized the level of Syrian assistance as "generally satisfactory," noting that "Syria responded to all of the Commission's requests, and did so in a timely manner, and in some instances comprehensive responses were provided."

¶3. (U) On June 11, official Syrian newspapers Al-Thawra, Tishreen and the English-language Syria Times each published a short, factual front-page story about the release of the fourth report. None included comments by SARG officials. On June 12, official papers reported a statement by the Minister of Information to a Lebanese channel, ANB, saying that Syria had fully cooperated with UNIIIC and that Brammertz's meetings with Asad and Shara'a indicated Syria's innocence. He described the report as relatively professional and not politicized. The regional Al-Shark al-Awsat newspaper quoted an official Syrian source as saying that the MFA was studying the report and would issue a response later. Syrian political commentators told Al-Shark al-Awsat that Brammertz' report was more objective than those of his predecessor, Detlev Mehlis.

¶4. (C) SARG officials are relatively happy with the report but are refraining from public comment to avoid being

cornered by future Brammertz allegations of regime involvement, according to Damascus-based Al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi. The report contained no big surprises, said Hamidi, adding that no one had expected Brammertz to reveal incriminating evidence before the investigation's completion. Brammertz' request for a year-long extension of the investigation benefits the SARG, as well as the U.S., Hamidi asserted. The U.S. is happy to isolate and pressure Syria for another year, without having to "open the Syria file" completely in reaction to specific accusations by Brammertz, Hamidi surmised. The SARG is happy to postpone having to confront any accusations for another year, while the regional situation continues to evolve in Syria's favor, Hamidi said. All4Syria news website publisher and Baathist reformer Ayman Abdul Noor agreed with Hamidi's assessment, characterizing the report as "nothing" and asserting that the regime likes it because it "postpones everything." According to Abdul Noor, the regime is "no longer fearful" that the investigation endangers its future hold on power, instead believing that, at the worst, it may eventually involve sacrificing a few individuals.

¶5. (C) Separately, analyst Imad Shueibi, who meets regularly with SARG officials, including high-level security officers, professed satisfaction with the report's professional quality. He said it was superior to the three previous reports, especially the first two produced by Mehlis. Shueibi repeated his view that Syria had nothing to do with Hariri's assassination, that Syrian security services were incapable of such an operation, and that Israel was likely involved. Shueibi said he had met earlier the morning of June 7 with former head of Syrian Military Intelligence in Lebanon Rustom Ghazaleh, whom he described as a friend. Ghazaleh purportedly expressed satisfaction with Brammertz's

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new lines of inquiry, including the connection between the assassination and the al-Madina Bank collapse, which Ghazaleh believed would "implicate French President Jacques Chirac, Hariri and others," but not him or other Syrian officials, Shueibi said. Ghazaleh also discounted the ability of Syrian security services to mount such an elaborate operation, Shueibi said.

¶6. (C) Comment: Clearly, the SARG is happy with the report's acknowledgment of Syrian cooperation and the lack of incriminating evidence of Syrian involvement. We suspect that regime officials are combing the report for signs of potential, future landmines and that it will weigh further public reaction with care. It is also clear that, based on previous conversations, the report deeply disappointed members of Syria's civil society and opposition who had been hoping for accusations of SARG involvement to help undermine the regime's current sense that it has a free hand because the pressure is off. Several civil society and opposition members had predicted, in the run-up to the report's release, that a positive assessment of Syrian cooperation would further fuel SARG confidence and prolong the SARG crackdown on the opposition. Separately, some observers believe that the SARG worries -- as it has in the past -- that this interim report hints at incriminating evidence being withheld by Brammertz, but so far this interpretation seems to be a minority view.

JOHNSON-CASARES